Fieldwork: Ethnography, Fieldnotes, Participant-Observation

Ethnographic research originates in the social sciences, and has been most often associated with anthropology. Performance studies has adapted fieldwork methods using a critical understanding of ethnography’s imperialist and colonialist past. Performance fieldwork often focuses on live performances in a variety of contexts, and, as in anthropology, pays particular attention to “culture in action” — that is, fieldwork looks closely at how a specific performance enacts, relates to, originates from, influences, and communicates with cultures or co-cultures. Fieldwork projects may be small-scale such as a night at the theatre, a visit to an ethnic restaurant, an outing to an interactive museum, or a day at a baseball game (see the “Critical Acts” section of TDR for some good examples). Larger research projects cast a wider net and involve investigation of the chosen site of performance over time — an ethnography of a particular performance tradition such as Barbara Browning’s 1995 *Samba: Resistance in Motion* or Michelle Kisliuk’s *Seize the Dance! BaAka Musical Life and the Ethnography of Performance* (2006). Fieldwork and ethnographic research involves participant-observation, which means that the researcher doesn’t simply observe the performance she is researching from afar; rather she engages as much as she feels possible with the event and those involved. For a good introduction to fieldwork visit New York University Professor Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s archived syllabus for her Performance Studies Issues and Methods course that lists extensive readings on fieldwork examples and methods. Also see the *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* edited by Norman Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln and *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance* by D. Soyini Madison for a diverse set of readings on ethnographic research related to performance.

The relationship between ethnography and performance is closely tied to the development of performance studies as its own field. Victor Turner’s ethnographic work was an important influence on the adaptation of fieldwork within a performance studies frame (see, for example, the essay “Performing Ethnography” by Victor Turner with Edie Turner in the *Performance Studies Reader*).

Performance Ethnography

Northwestern University scholar Dwight Conquergood greatly influenced the move from a focus mainly on “ethnography of performance” to the contemporary qualitative research methods surrounding “performance ethnography.” Key readings by Dwight Conquergood on ethnography include “Interventions and Radical Research” (also in the *Performance Studies Reader*) as well as “Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance.” Other important texts on performance
ethnography include Norman Denzin’s *Performance Ethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture* (2003). Performance ethnography moves beyond a researcher conducting fieldwork in and around a particular site of performance. Scholars and artists working in the area of performance ethnography use fieldwork methods to generate material for new performances. Influential scholars in this field include Omi Osun Joni L. Jones (see her essay in *Theatre Topics* “Performance Ethnography: The Role of Embodiment in Cultural Authenticity” [2002]) and Della Pollack (see “Marking New Directions in Performance Ethnography” in *Text and Performance Quarterly* [2006]).

**Interviews**

Artists such as Anna Deavere Smith incorporate interviewing techniques as part of the theatre-making process. *The Laramie Project* created by Tectonic Theatre Project was similarly created using extensive interviews. For additional readings on the relationship between performance and ethnography, see the 2012 special issue of *Canadian Theatre Review* on “Performance Ethnography.”

**Sample Projects**

As an introduction to fieldwork, choose a performance to attend or a performance space to visit—it may be a theatre event, a parade, a music concert, a wedding, a graduation, a sporting event, a formal dance, a ballet class, a unique restaurant, a gourmet food store, etc. Spend as much time as you can—a couple of hours if possible. Take notes (see *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* by Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw for tips). Re-visit your notes after you initially write them and add new thoughts, analysis, and any other thoughts that arise.

If you are interesting in learning how to interview someone, the best way thing to do is to listen to some good interviews. Professor Kirshenblatt-Gimblett includes links to several sample interviews in her NYU syllabus. Think about what you notice when you listen (or read) a good interview—what makes a good interview? What unites the questions an interviewer asks and what purpose(s) are served through the asking? How are answers dealt with? When learning how to interview subjects, you should practice if you can with some friends—to make sure you have thought of the details. For example, are you going to record the interviewee? How? When will you ask the person if they will feel comfortable being recorded? The tricky part about conducting a good interview is that even though you want the interviewee to generate all the content, the interview relies on your questions to shape and guide the process.